

Gulf of Mexico Caucus

ALABAMA · FLORIDA · LOUISIANA · MISSISSIPPI · TEXAS

Chairwoman: Rep. Katherine Harris (R - 13th Florida)



GULF OF MEXICO CAUCUS *BACKGROUND*

Mission Statement

The Gulf of Mexico has earned the nickname the "Mediterranean of the Americas" due to its strategic importance to the Western Hemisphere. The waters of the Gulf possess a wealth of critical natural resources, while providing vital commercial and transportation links between the nations of North America, Latin America, and the Caribbean. Moreover, as one of the most prosperous regions in the world, the eleven U.S. and Mexican states that border the Gulf confront numerous opportunities and challenges – such as economic development, homeland security, and environmental protection -- which arise uniquely as a consequence of their shared water boundary.

The Gulf of Mexico Caucus strives to heighten awareness of this collective destiny and its impact upon America's future while influencing the major public policy debates that continue in Congress and across the nation regarding fair trade, foreign aid, immigration, port security, environmental stewardship, and energy independence. Specifically, the Caucus disseminates research and crafts legislation, while engaging elected officials, constituents, businesses, and community leaders in a unified effort to promote prosperity and security throughout the Gulf region.

The Caucus focuses its endeavors in three core areas:

- ***Economic Development:*** The Caucus endeavors to improve the socioeconomic conditions in the five U.S. Gulf states through transportation and infrastructural improvements, the promotion of tourism, faster, cleaner, and cheaper cargo transportation, and the expansion of U.S. exports.
- ***Homeland Security:*** The Caucus seeks to enhance the protection of America's southern border, placing a particular spotlight upon port security.

- **Environmental Protection:** The agenda of the Caucus places a premium upon the conservation of the Gulf's precious natural resources, shorelines, and estuaries.

I. Economic Development

A. Feeding the Nation

1. Harvesting the Sea: The Gulf of Mexico's estuaries constitute one of the most productive natural systems on earth. These estuaries produce more food per acre than the most prolific Midwestern farmland. The National Marine Fisheries Service reported a yield of **more than 1.8 billion pounds** of fish and shellfish in the five U.S. Gulf states worth **over \$991.3 million** in 2000, as compared to a one billion pound harvest in the Pacific states (excluding Alaska), which generated less than half that income.

Four of the top five fishing ports in the United States (as measured by weight) are located in the five Gulf states.

- The Gulf's commercial fisheries produced ***1.8 billion pounds of fish and shellfish*** in 2000, with a dockside value of ***\$991.4 million***. Gulf landings of shrimp led the nation in 2000 (288 million pounds worth \$656 million), which accounted for approximately ***80 percent of the national total***.
- The Gulf produced the largest volume of oysters in 2000 (20.7 million pounds valued at \$44 million), which amounted to ***60 percent of the national total***.
- Gulf recreational fishing garners almost ***30 percent*** of U.S. saltwater fishing expenditures;
- ***23 percent*** of all U.S. saltwater recreational jobs are located in the five Gulf states.

Breakdown by state:

- **Alabama** – over 30.59 million pounds of fish and shellfish worth more than \$64.0 million.
- **Florida** – over 75.4 million pounds of fish and shellfish worth more than \$156.1 million.
- **Louisiana** – over 1.4 billion pounds of fish and shellfish worth more than \$418.9 million.
- **Mississippi** – over 217.7 million pounds of fish and shellfish worth more than \$58.7 million.
- **Texas** – over 110 million pounds of fish and shellfish worth more than \$293.6 million.

2. Agriculture: According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's statistics, agricultural production (crops, livestock, and associated products) in Alabama, Florida, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Texas totaled nearly \$28 billion in 1997.

Breakdown by state:

- **Alabama** -- \$ 3.098 billion
- **Florida** -- \$ 6.004 billion
- **Louisiana** -- \$ 2.031 billion
- **Mississippi** -- \$ 3.127 billion
- **Texas** -- \$ 13.766 billion

B. Meeting America's Energy Demand

The Minerals Management Service (MMS) found that in September 2001, 119 exploration wells were under construction in Gulf waters, 47 of which were being drilled in water depths that exceeded 1,000 feet. MMS also reported that in 2001:

- The Gulf contained 4,021 producing platforms and 156 active operators;
- The Gulf accounted for 93 percent of U.S. Offshore oil production and approximately 98 percent of U.S. gas production;
- The Gulf's deepwater oil production had increased by almost 1,200 percent from 1985 to 2001 while the Gulf's deepwater gas production had improved by about 2,850 percent during that same period; and
- More than 21,000 producing company jobs existed as a direct result of oil and gas activities in the Gulf's outer continental shelf.

C. Gulf Ports – The On-Ramps of a Trade Superhighway

- **Seven of the nation's top 10 ports and two of the world's top seven ports** (as measured by tonnage or cargo value) are located in the Gulf of Mexico.
- The Port of Houston is **ranked first** in the United States in foreign waterborne commerce, second in total tonnage, and sixth in the World.
- The Greater Baton Rouge Port is Gulf of Mexico's farthest inland deep-water port.

D. The Gulf of Mexico Region – A Popular Place to Live and Play: Tourism and Quality of Life

- Census Bureau estimates show a 14.5 percent population increase in the five U.S. Gulf states between 1990 and 1999 (from a combined total of 40.8 million in 1990 to an estimated 46.7 million in 1999).
- The Gulf of Mexico supports a tourist industry that encompasses thousands of businesses and tens of thousands of jobs, worth over \$20 billion annually.
- During 2000, destinations in the Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana welcomed more than 25 million visitors and handled more than 1.1 million qualified inquires. These visitors spent as estimated \$16 billion.
- The Gulf of Mexico serves as an ideal location for water sports such as skiing, boating, jet skiing – and, of course, swimming and tanning.

II. Homeland Security

The Gulf Coast possesses 7 of the 12 busiest ports in the United States – thus, one terrorist attack or devastating natural disaster affecting a Gulf port would seriously injure our nation’s economy. Accordingly, enhancing port security constitutes an indispensable component of our homeland security strategy. Moreover, as we justifiably focus upon the integrity of our land border, we must not forget that the Gulf’s water border comprises two-thirds of the southern U.S. boundary.

In order to protect our homeland and ensure the continued vitality of our economy, we must direct our nation’s attention to the Gulf’s security needs -- while constantly balancing this imperative with our economy’s reliance upon the dependable, free flow of shipping and other commerce.

A. Key Facts about U.S. Ports

- U.S. ports create more than 13 million domestic jobs, many of which are located in the five Gulf states.
- U.S. ports serve as the point of entry or exit for 95% of our nation’s overseas international trade.
- U.S. ports also accept 25% percent of our nation’s domestic trade.
- Each year, U.S. ports handle 9 million containers, 9,500 container ships, 140 million passengers, and 12 million registered recreational boats.
- U.S. ports generate \$800 billion a year for our nation’s economy.

B. Disaster Preparedness and Response

During the summer and fall of 2004, the U.S. Gulf Coast endured a series of hurricanes that wrought misery and destruction on a scope that was unprecedented in U.S. history. In addition to the tragic loss of life they caused, these storms destroyed homes, livelihoods, and vital infrastructure.

Hurricanes, flooding and other natural disasters strike the Gulf region every year. Yet, many of the federal agencies responsible for manning the front lines of recovery remain at odds with state and local governments regarding how to ensure that money, supplies, and other critical resources reach the people who need them the most. The Gulf of Mexico Caucus can – and must -- lead a reform movement which will adjust how disaster relief grants are awarded, allocated, and distributed.

C. First Responders

As they constitute our first line of defense against the ravages of terrorism and natural disaster, first responders receive millions of dollars per year in homeland security grants. The Gulf of Mexico Caucus remains dedicated to helping these heroes obtain the resources they need and deserve. In particular, the Caucus focuses upon ensuring that the Gulf region’s first responders

receive the full attention of Congress. Moreover, from fire training academies in Louisiana to bio-terror research centers in Florida, the Caucus seeks to transform the Gulf region into the model for homeland security training and initiatives. The discovery, development, and implementation of pilot projects can play a critical role in enhancing the Gulf region's security while bolstering the excellence of its higher education and research institutions.

III. Environmental Protection

The population explosion along the U.S. Gulf Coast continues to raise public health concerns – both on land and in the water. Coastal counties are experiencing the second fastest rate of growth in the United States, but basic services such as wastewater treatment remain inadequate in many areas.

- More than **50 percent** of the Gulf's shellfish growing waters are under harvest restrictions due to water quality concerns.

A. Habitat Loss

Important habitats and their functions have declined.

- **50 percent** of Gulf inland and coastal wetlands have been lost.
- Up to **80 percent** of Gulf sea grasses have been decimated in some areas.
- The Gulf provides diverse habitats that support **thousands** of species of coastal and marine wildlife.
- About **98 percent** of Gulf fish species depend upon wetlands during some stage of their life cycle.

B. Environmental Damage

Among other sources, fertilizers, human sewage, animal waste, landscape changes, and fossil fuels result in the presence of too many nutrients in the Gulf of Mexico.

The incidence of harmful algal blooms has increased from 200 in the 1970s to 700 in the 1990s. Since 1991, these algal blooms have cost Gulf state economies nearly \$300 million, primarily due to fish kills, public health problems, and lost tourism revenue.

More of the Gulf's estuaries are experiencing or are likely to experience excessive nutrients and low dissolved oxygen levels, which directly impacts the health of fisheries.

The largest area of low-dissolved oxygen in the western Atlantic occurs on the Texas-Louisiana continental shelf region, which stems from the Mississippi River's nitrogen pollution and man-made physical changes, as well as from the natural layering of salt and fresh water as the Mississippi River enters the Gulf.

C. Invasive Species:

Non-indigenous plants and animals can wreak havoc upon the Gulf's environment. In 1991 alone, U.S. ports received an estimated **79 million metric tons** of ballast water from foreign ports (the equivalent of 2.4 million gallons per hour), which has provided a significant pathway for the introduction of invasive species.

- A recent report estimates that invasive species on land and in water cause more than \$137 billion in economic damages in the United States each year.
- More than 4000 species of invertebrates, algae and fishes are transported in ballast tanks every day.

IV. General Background on the Gulf Region

A. Basic Overview

The five U.S. Gulf states – Alabama, Florida, Louisiana, Mississippi and Texas – boast a total population of 50 million and a combined Gross State Product of \$1.6 trillion. This region possesses 10 United States Senators, five governors, and 75 members of the United States House of Representatives.

All five states of the Gulf region share common interests as well as similar opportunities and challenges. As regional and international trade progress, the homeland security, trade, economic development, and environmental protection issues will multiply in scope and complexity. Yet, without a concerted political effort, the federal government's habit of neglecting the Gulf region in the allocation of funding and other resources appears likely to continue.

By coordinating the efforts of members of Congress with other organizations and individuals who possess a stake in critical region's future, the Gulf of Mexico Caucus will exert significant political influence – leveraging unity to produce greater prosperity and security. The Gulf of Mexico Caucus will achieve its goals by hosting workshops, field events, and media opportunities.

B. Quick Facts on the Five U.S. Gulf States

- **Seven** of the United States' 12 busiest ports are located in the five U.S. Gulf states.
- **56%** of the United States' imported oil passes through this region.
- Total population of more than **50 million**.
- Combined Gross State Product of **\$1.6 trillion**.
- Gulf Coast ports are served by the Gulf Intra-coastal Waterway, which extends **1,200 miles** from Brownsville, Texas to Carrabelle, Florida. Approximately 80 million tons of cargo is transported via the Waterway each year.

C. Historic and Ecological Notes

- The Gulf of Mexico wetlands are famous for their large populations of wildlife – which includes shorebirds, colonial nesting birds, and **75 percent** of the migratory waterfowl traversing the United States.
- More than **400 species** of shells can be found in the Gulf of Mexico. Gulf beaches are recognized as the best shelling beaches in North America.
- The Gulf Islands National Seashore is a wild 150-mile stretch of barrier islands and coastal mainland in Mississippi and Florida. The warm waters of the Gulf of Mexico nourish 11 separate units, which include bayou, salt marsh, live oak and southern magnolia forests, as well as snow-white beaches.
- The Mobile-Tensaw Delta comprises one of the largest watersheds in the world, which begins in Tennessee and ends at Alabama's Gulf coast.
- The Gulf of Mexico Coast line boasts a unique array of flora and fauna, which provides a habitat for endangered species such as the Perdido beach mouse, the cotton rat, the white-topped pitcher plant, the red-cockaded woodpecker, the pine woods rooster, and the Louisiana nutria.
- The world's longest man-made beach (26 miles long) is located on the Mississippi Gulf Coast.
- The Mississippi River deposits more than 3.3 million gallons of water into the Gulf of Mexico every second.
- The Gulf of Mexico possesses the largest population of bottle nose dolphins in the world, the largest concentration of which live in the Mississippi Sound.
- Indian mounds, which exist on the campus of Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge, were built 450 years before the first Egyptian pyramid.
- Historic Spanish Point in Osprey, Florida was settled over 4,000 years ago and included tools artifacts and burials mounds from early humans.
- The Friendship Oak on the Mississippi Gulf Coast is more than 500 years old. Legend holds that those individuals who stand beneath its shade "remain friends through all their lifetime no matter where fate may take them in after years."
- In 1703, Mardi Gras was first celebrated in the French colony of Mobile. Years later this pre-Lenten carnival moved to New Orleans, which often receives credit for its origination.
- The name "Mississippi" means "father of waters." The name "Biloxi" means "first people."

- The Lake Pontchartrain Causeway Bridge (24 miles long) is the second longest continuous over-water bridge in the world.
- The city of New Orleans exists 10 to 15 feet below sea level. Huge levees protect the city from the waters of the mighty Mississippi.
- On a 1699 expedition, Pierre le Moyne and his brother, Jean Baptiste le Moyne, discovered an area on high bluffs along the Mississippi River. In their diaries, they record evidence of a pole at this location, which was stained with the blood of fish and animals, and which served as the dividing line between two Native American tribes - the Bayougoula and the Houmas. The blood-stained pole gave the town of Baton Rouge its name, which means "red stick" in French.
- America's largest rocket propulsion testing complex, which tests all space shuttle main engines, is located at the John C. Stennis Space Center on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. With NASA as the lead agency, this federal city hosts 30 additional agencies engaged in space, environmental programs, and national defense.

The Gulf of Mexico Caucus builds "Unity, Prosperity and Security" for the five U.S. states that border the Gulf of Mexico by promoting a collective approach by political, business, and community leaders in addressing homeland security, trade, economic development, environmental protection, and related issues